

News Release

Rhode Island National Wildlife Refuge Complex

Block Island NWR □ John H. Chafee NWR at Pettaquamscutt Cove □ Ninigret NWR □ Sachuest Point NWR □ Truston Pond NWR



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Piping plovers return to nest in Rhode Island!

March 27, 2018 – The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service needs your help this summer to protect threatened piping plovers, their nests and chicks on Rhode Island beaches. These rare migratory birds have returned to Rhode Island and will spend several weeks establishing territories and beginning to nest on the state's beaches.

To help protect and encourage piping plover nesting, the Service ropes specific areas to protect the breeding birds from pedestrians, pets and vehicles, since disturbance can cause the birds to abandon the site or could result in eggs being unknowingly crushed. This year the Service will continue to rope off National Wildlife Refuge beaches at the Mean High Water level to protect nesting and foraging areas for adults and chicks.

What people can to do help:

- Respect all areas fenced or posted for protection of wildlife.
- Do not approach or linger near piping plovers or their nests.
- Please fill sand castle moats and other holes in the sand, where chicks that cannot fly may become trapped.
- Please leave pets at home. Plovers perceive dogs as predators.
- Don't leave or bury trash or food scraps on beaches. Garbage attracts predators which may prey upon piping plover eggs or chicks.
- Volunteer!

The piping plover is a small, stocky, sandy-colored bird resembling a sandpiper, and they have been protected under the federal Endangered Species Act since 1986. Piping plovers typically return to their breeding grounds in April, but in recent years their arrival seems to be getting earlier and earlier. Males typically return before the females to set up and defend their area and will start creating pre-nests, called scrapes. Scrapes are small depressions in the sand that are sometimes lined with small stones or shell fragments, one of which the female will eventually lay her eggs.

Once the female lays eggs, the pair will take turns incubating the eggs for about a month.

Once hatched, the chicks are up and running, feeding on small insects and invertebrates in the intertidal zone.

“They look like cotton balls with long yellow legs,” says plover biologist Erin King. “They scurry up and down the beach, looking for food in the washed up seaweed.”

They are most vulnerable during the first five days, after which their chances for survival start to increase. Over the next few weeks, their wings develop and they learn to fly. Until that time, chicks respond to vehicles, predators, and pedestrians by “freezing” and crouching down in the sand to hide, becoming almost perfectly camouflaged.

“During this crucial time, vehicle operators may accidentally run over and kill plover chicks without even knowing it,” says King. “Some even get trapped in tire tracks, too little to get out and die from sun exposure and lack of food.”

Since being listed in 1986, piping plover numbers in the state have increased from 10 pairs to 98 pairs in 2017. Funding for the program comes from a cooperative agreement with the State of Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management. Volunteers and Service staff monitor plover populations as well as educate the public, and they play a key role in increasing our presence on the beaches.



Piping plover scrape with plover tracks. USFWS



Photo taken at Napatree Point by Janice Sassi, 2011.



Banded Plover at East Beach Watch Hill. Taken by Russ Thompson, 2010.



Piping plover chick. USFWS